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*Helena Brautović i Dragana Brkan\**

# Public Relations Ethics and Ethical Codes

## Summary

The term Public Relations Ethics is often understood as an oxymoron, as rare are those who find anything ethical in it. The fact that PR incurred a bad reputation and PR professionals became manipulators of public mind rather than conveyers of truth was a result of a PR' misrepresentation in the public. Tarnished history that effected opinion about PR may be explained by several situations in which PR were used to camouflage some serious problems, not to mention something that is today called „spin“, a whole new area of PR dedicated only for working behind the scenes. There is nothing ethical in spin, and it is not a surprise that everyone involved in communications claims that spin has nothing to do with PR. Ethics are important in business as much as in everyday life, but determining the criteria of good and evil and then acting accordingly may seem rather easy. But PR professionals often stumble over many questions and everyday decisions about what is and what is not ethical. That is why PR and communication organizations have a set of rules or codes by which they act and in which they believe. Ethical codes make a kind of promise about what behavior can be expected and accepted.

**Key Words:** Public Relations, Ethics, Ethical Codes, Business Ethics

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\* Author Helena Brautovic ia a lecturer at the University of Dubrovnik, and Dragana Brkan is a student at the University of Dubrovnik

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## Odnosi s javnostima i etički kodovi

### Sažetak

Imidž odnosa s javnostima kao profesije često je nepravедno negativan, a razlog tome je neprofesionalno i neetično postupanje nekih pojedinaca u okviru struke. Ide se toliko daleko da se etika u odnosima s javnošću smatra oksimoronom, dvama nespojivim i kontradiktornim pojmovima. Autorice će stoga u radu pokušati definirati najprije odnose s javnostima te najvažnije ciljeve, a potom i etiku općenito te važnost etike u poslovanju. Etično rezoniranje stručnjaka u odnosima s javnošću balansira između Biblijskog stava tipa "sve što želite da ljudi čine vama, činite i vi njima" (Matej 7:12) i profesionalne odanosti kompaniji za koju rade. Stoga je bilo potrebno donijeti pravila, kodove prema kojima će se ravnati stručnjaci odnosa s javnostima, i koji će im pomoći razriješiti eventualne etičke dileme.

**Ključne riječi:** odnosi s javnostima, etika, etički kod, etika u poslovanju

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\* Autorica Helena Brautović je viši predavač Sveučilišta u Dubrovniku, a autorica Dragana Brkan je studentica preddiplomskog studija Mediji i kultura društva Sveučilišta u Dubrovniku

## Introduction

There are many different definitions of public relations and most of them contain relatively the same basic elements because they number all the activities that PR comprehends. Learning about PR is systematizing practical experience that for instance comprehends help in crises situations, understanding the public opinion from behalf of management<sup>1</sup>. PR is used in many institutions: the unions, business organizations, state departments, religious institutions, non – governmental organizations and foundations. All of them have their own goals. In order to achieve their goals they have to create successful relationships with different publics as employees, shareholders, local community. Basically, the most important thing is to achieve understanding between client and its public through effective communication, which is not easy to achieve and practitioners must always be aware of public opinion and the public stance regarding an organization.

There are four basic PR models:

1. The press agency model – the oldest of four models (most popular during the late 1800's) is based on generating media coverage. Publicist P.T. Barnum was one of the first to use this model of communication by pioneering press agency agencies to promote local appearances of his touring circus. Advocates of this model did not believe in “bad” publicity.
2. The public information model – (appeared in the early 1900's). This model is based on the idea that good media relations provide good publicity.
3. The two-way asymmetric model – Edward Bernays outlined the basic components of the two – way asymmetric model during the 1920's, based on the idea that to reach a “caused agreement” it is necessary to base communication on information gathered from a targeted public<sup>2</sup>.
4. The two-way symmetric model - also known as one of Grunting's four models, utilizes public input to improve a product and the general opinion of an organization. This directly relates to the idea

<sup>1</sup> Kunczik, Michael: Odnosi s javnostima, Fakultet političkih znanosti Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, Zagreb, 2006, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> <http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/Fall99/Westbrook/models.htm>, 22. 08. 2008., 11:03

that the main function of public relations is to build reputation, which has grown increasingly more important for all organizations. Ultimately, an organization's good reputation and positive image are the two main keys to edging out competition.

For PR today, the simple use of one model is not sufficient. Combining the models can help simplify and streamline the industry, but ultimately the key to success is to follow the innovation and new trends in communication, especially new technologies. Today's technologies created something that is called "*social media*" such as Facebook, My Space and Twitter. People react over these portals in the speed of light and it is almost impossible to predict the reactions. The development of new technologies put even bigger pressure on PR professionals. Social media today are more available than ever, which puts a PR professional in a position of constant preparedness.

## Ethics

Ethics is the study of what constitutes right or wrong, or good or bad human behavior. More precisely, „it is set of criteria by which the decisions are being made about what is wrong“<sup>3</sup>. Through the centuries many different views about ethics were made. Utilitarians, for instance, take position that the ethical act is one that produces the greatest possible balance of good over bad for anyone affected. This is also called Robin Hood ethics. A famous utilitarian, John Stuart Mill said that neither the intent behind the action nor the fundamental rightness or wrongness of the action is at issue, only the consequences. In people's mind this approach often results in the position that the end justifies the means. It seems that the principle might be useful way to distribute the greatest good to greatest number, if and only if the decision-makers are able to make an accurate judgment about the potential outcomes and that those outcomes go beyond the self-interest of those making the moral choice<sup>4</sup>. Knowing this, it seems that many PR approaches are utilitarian in nature. On the other hand, deontology practitioners claim that certain principles are right or wrong regardless to their consequences. A moral person not only must

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<sup>3</sup> Gower, Karla K.: *Legal and ethical Restraints on Public Relations*, Waveland Pr Inc, Illinois, 2003, p.1.

<sup>4</sup> Parsons, Patricia J.: *Ethics in Public Relations*, Kogan Page, London, 2008, p. 41.

achieve just results through acts but also must employ the proper means and act with good intentions. Immanuel Kant argued that moral principles could be known as a result reason alone, for him our actions are moral only when they are done out of our sense of duty to be fair and honest. These theories are often criticized as representing the truth as an absolute rule even if it leads one to ignore situations in which lying might as well be justified. In business, it is not about choosing between right or wrong, but about choosing between two rights or two obligations. Law and moralities are related, but they are certainly not the same thing. Organizations that follow the letter of the law do nothing more than clearly look out for their own needs without considering the possibilities that their responsibilities to their communities might be morally rather than simply legally dictated.

## **Ethics in business**

Any decision begins with a question whether an organization (business) created by a state (or a different someone) can have social responsibilities. Companies are not rational beings but they are established by someone, and their actions are determined by rational beings. Therefore, officer of corporations must ultimately assume responsibilities for corporation actions<sup>5</sup>. Ethics on the work place or within a whole organization became one of the most important issues of a successful business. Usually organizational ethics is dictated by management, and most of its employees will accept the pattern if it is followed by rewards. Individuals will also react under the influence of their own values that have been formed under the influence of cultural, political, economical facts. The way that individual was raised has a great influence on the way he/she will react as a grown up person. It is important that ethical norms in organization are defined in written form. The ethical codes must exist to protect individual rights, and to enhance the greater good for the majority of people. The existence of the code itself does not guarantee ethical behavior. The following are few reasons that could affect unethical behavior in organization:

- Giving advantage to shorter usage over long-term goals

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<sup>5</sup> Gower, Karla K. : Legal and Ethical Restraints on Public Relations , Waveland, Illinois, 2003, p. 8.

- Non existing written ethical code
- Solving ethical dilemmas too fast and over the surface
- Thinking about ethics as only legal question<sup>6</sup>

## Public relations ethics

PR is often seen as a profession that is always working behind the scenes, gliding in and out troubled situations. But PR is also often considered to be a corporate conscience which fits well with the business ethics of social responsibility. The PRSA (Public Relations Society of America) developed its code of professional standards for the practice of PR to meet three goals:

- to provide behavioral guidelines to its members
- to educate management on public relations standards
- To distinguish public relations professionals from those individuals who use the title but are perceived as giving the profession a bad name<sup>7</sup>.

What is important to remember is that ethic codes are not universal, because it cannot be assumed that everyone, regardless to the situation and culture, abides by the same ethical standards. It can be difficult to balance the interests of all of these publics with the interests of the organization itself. Ethics need to have main role in communication because unethical communications are not as obvious as false advertising. Using words in certain way good communicator can affect other, change their expectation and behavior. Good strategies can create a powerful message that tells people to take action. Skills and knowledge as that are very powerful and easy to abuse<sup>8</sup>. The power of PR to shape opinions is one of the most compelling reasons to consider our duties to society, and to take care not to abuse that power by dishonest use of manipulation. PR shelter an organization's reputation and are, at the same time, its conscience. It is a very powerful position that they hold and also face

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<sup>6</sup> Fox, Renata: Poslovna Komunikacija, Sveučilišna naklada Zagreb, Zagreb, 2006, p. 117

<sup>7</sup> Gower, Karla K.: Legal and Ethical Restraints on Public Relations, Waveland, Illinois, 2003, p. 13

<sup>8</sup> Rouse Michael & Sandra: Poslovne komunikacije, Masmedia, Zagreb, 2005, p.213.

different challenges as misleading information, influence of management actions, and promotion of inferior products, discrimination or political influence. The definition itself of what *Public Relation Ethics* are should be: the knowledge, understanding and reasoning to questions of right or wrong behavior in the professional practice of public relations.<sup>9</sup>

## Persuasion or propaganda

On behalf of the strategic persuasion, public relations practitioners have, over the years, resorted to a variety of techniques that hover on the border between persuasion and blatant propaganda, or between the truth and lying omission. Words that are chosen to convey the message can have huge ethical consequences. In the world of PR, an advocate is someone who speaks or acts in defense of an organization, issue or point of view. Advocacy almost always leads to the need for persuasion. In the eyes of many, persuasion equals propaganda and manipulation. In public eyes what you defend is what you support. Lobby technique that PR professionals often employ is an attempt to persuade particular groups - notably governments - to their point of view. All of this is expectable, except propaganda. The difference between PR and propaganda, which is whole unethical, is that propaganda is one-way mode of communication whose purpose is creating followers; it is a way a controlling opinion. It is certainly not good for PR to be mentioned in the same context so it is important to create public awareness about what it really represents.

## Corporate social responsibility (CSR)

Social responsibility provides a kind of ethical framework for achieving organizational goals. It means „ensuring commotional success in ways that honor ethical values and respect people, communities and environment“<sup>10</sup>. In other words, social responsibility means operating a business that meets or exceeds both legal and ethical expectations that

<sup>9</sup> Fox, Renata: Poslovna Komunikacija, Sveučilišna naklada Zagreb, Zagreb, 2006, p.9.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.bsr.org/>, 16. 08. 2009., 23:25

society has for a certain kind of industry, but what is considered fulfilling in one country doesn't mean it would work in another. What goes under CSR is: taking care of environment, communities, employing members of communities, educational opportunities. But corporate ethics and public relations are not the same, because PR ethics focuses on the ethical implications of the strategies and tactics that are applied to solve the public relations and communications problems of organizations. It focuses on the ethical issues that emanate directly and sometimes indirectly from the strategic decisions that are made to meet public relations objects<sup>11</sup>. PR have the most important external communication function in an organization and as such sits at the interface between the organizations decision-making and its external environment. The only way for PR to keep a role of the guardian of the organizational conscience is to be a part of the police making team, representing publics and their needs to management. Potential business benefits for organizations are numerous, from building positive image and reputation to even enhancing in material way. That is why so many criticize social responsibility as not so ethical and say that it only exist as just part of PR strategies also called *windows - dressing*. Critics go as far for accusing companies such as British American tobacco for using CSR only to distract the public from ethical questions posed by their core operations.

### **Why do we need codes?**

Almost any religion or society has a set of rules, codes by which they live and believe in. Most of professional organizations have their internal codes of ethics. PR and communications organizations are no different. The most useful way of looking at a code of ethics is as a professions contract with the society it serves rather than, as some people may like to believe, a cook book to thumb through when looking for the answer to a dilemma<sup>12</sup>. Codes of ethic should set members apart from others, who may purport to provide similar services to the public, by establishing a set of principles by which to work. The code makes a kind of promise about what behaviour can be expected. In literature there are some arguments that say organizations shouldn't set any special codes of ethics apart from moral guides given within society. Also, most of the

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<sup>11</sup> Parsons, Patricia J.: Ethics in Public Relations, Kogan Page, London, 2008, p. 150

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p.64.



practitioners consider codes as merely minimum standards they need to follow but nobody actually tries to continually further improve the standards. Some go even further and say that ethical codes in PR were created only to professionalize an unprofessional occupation. However, the field of PR is not more ethical because it has codes of ethics, but in a way it should serve as a tool to promote discussion of ethics and to improve how it is being dealt with the ethical questions and grey areas that are encountered as someone is performing his work.

### **Making decisions**

Dilemma is a particular type of problem, one in which we are faced with two or more choices all of which are objectionable for one reason or another. If there were one clearly inoffensive choice beside other more offensive ones, than there would be no dilemma, no problem, and no doubt about making the right decision... further it would not be an ethical dilemma to have to choose between a numbers of good outcomes. So how can one know that we are going in right direction when it comes to making ethical decisions? It often comes to an intuition, and an ethically defensible decision is one that you can live with, for which you are able to provide a reasonable, ethics-based rationale to observers. There are two types of problem in business ethics: *the acute dilemma* - when you truly do not know what is the right thing to do and *the acute rationalization*- when you do know the right thing to do but fail to do it.<sup>13</sup> In PR, strategic approaches are based on a careful process which has four steps:

- a research phase consisting of collecting all pertinent data, analysing it and determining the problems
- a planning phase where one of the main tasks is to determine what we want to accomplish (objectives and figure out the best way to accomplish it
- an implementation phase where we carry out the strategies and tactics we figured out in planning phase
- an evaluation phase where we figure out if our plan actually accomplished what we set out to do and more

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 134

Making ethical decision is a bit easier and it is considered as a phase that is similar to ones above. The planning phase in making ethical decisions forces us to examine the outcomes we want, but also to consider the outcomes that are likely, given the choices available. This is where we can use what has come to be known in ethics circles as „*the Potter box*“. The decision making model was developed by Harvard divinity professor Ralph Potter and is now widely accepted as an organized approach to considering the application of values, principles and loyalties to making defensible ethical decisions. This is what a box of decisions which should easy up the decision making process looks like:

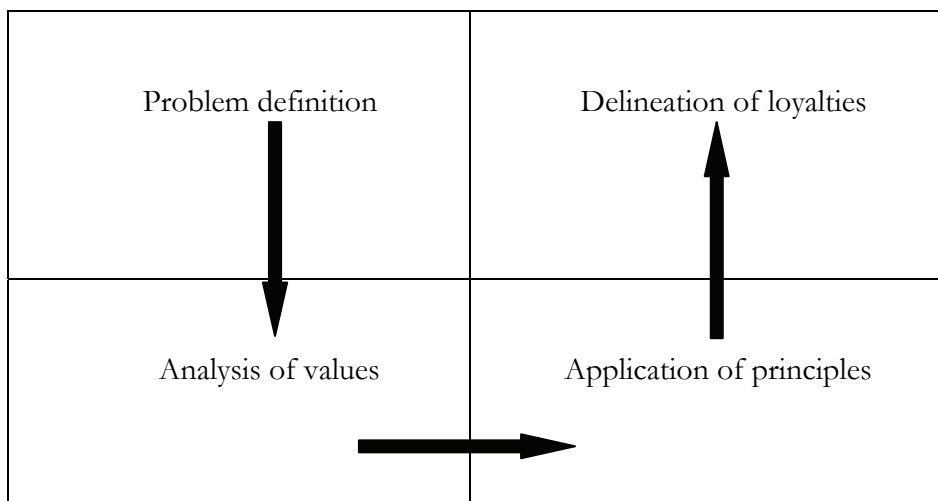


Figure 1. The „Potter box“

Once it is clear that there is an ethical issue, it is necessary to define it. The next step is to determine the values that we bring to bear the situation. Than we apply selected principles to the situation and consider to whom we have duties... the final phase is to evaluate the decision, to determine if it is a good one. This is where a second guess comes into play. But the second guess is accomplished before the first guess is carried through.

1. Problem definition - gather all available information that will show how situation became the way it is and what exactly it looks in that

very moment. If the problem is not defined accurately, it cannot be expected to be solved to anybody's satisfaction.

2. Analysis of values - after one becomes aware of all facts of the situation it is time that he or she examines his own personal values that could be important in the situation. Values are those aspects of life you consider about what is right and what is wrong. If you value money it is money and security more than truth and fairness, they are more likely to manifest in decision. These values are likely to change as you experience more life. These values can be personal but also professional and the second ones are also very important in decision making process. When ethical decision is being made, best practice demands personal values are put up above personal ones.
3. Application of principles - in this case principles are those approaches to moral decision-making. Finding the mean between two extremes, or you consider the greatest good to the greatest number of people...(utility principle)
4. Delineation of loyalties - the final step before making the final decision about whom to be loyal. To employer, client, society or yourself. According to most professional associations, the most important loyalty in a given professional situation should be employer or client. Then again there are whistle-blowing situations where you are determined that there is a potential harm that could be done to society and therefore your loyalty to your employer needs to take second place to your loyalty to society.

## Conclusion

Not much is written about Public Relations Ethics. The literature is mostly oriented on the legal part of the profession rather than the moral one. It is necessary for a PR professional to be aware of ethical problems that may be encountered in the PR business as well as to be ready to cope with the dilemmas and find the best solution for the parties involved. Every profession has its own Code of Behaviour, also known as professional standards while PR organizations and associations have Ethical Codes, some of which are really good examples of how

organizations care that their profession is considered trustworthy in the eyes of public. Even with such detailed help one is never too sure what is the right step to do, so every individual has to decide about his/her own actions and take the consequences as they come.

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